

Statement of J. Read Smith, President
National Association of Conservation Districts
Relative To Conservation Programs Administered
by the
US Department of Agriculture
Presented to the
Committee on Agriculture
Subcommittee on Conservation, Credit, Rural Development and Research
June 6, 2001

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, I am J. Read Smith, a farmer from St. John, Washington and a conservation district supervisor from the Palouse Rock Lake Conservation District Board. Along with my wife and son, we run a small-grain farm and ranching operation in the Palouse Region of eastern Washington. I am President of the National Association of Conservation Districts and I appreciate your invitation to be here today to share conservation districts' recommendations on conservation programs administered by the US Department of Agriculture.

The National Association of Conservation Districts – NACD – is the nonprofit organization that represents the nation's 3,000 conservation districts and 17,000 men and women – district officials – who serve on their governing boards. Conservation districts are local units of government established under state law to carry out natural resource management programs at the local level. Currently, conservation districts work with NRCS and others to provide technical and other assistance to more than two-and-half million cooperating landowners and operators to help them manage and protect their land and water resources. Conservation districts encompass roughly 98 percent of the private lands in the United States.

I am here today to represent the views of those 17,000 conservation district officials. But more than that, as locally elected or appointed public officials, collectively we represent the American public; all of the constituents in the districts we serve. As we talk today about USDA's conservation programs and the next Farm Bill, I urge you to keep in mind that we are the people who work at the very point where the programs you authorize are delivered to the customer.

Mr. Chairman, I will focus my remarks today on a new vision conservation districts have for private lands conservation in America. We also have a number of recommendations for adjusting and maintaining the conservation programs currently authorized by statute, which I will discuss in Part II of my statement.

I. A New Vision of Conservation

The private working lands that comprise America's farms, forests and ranches represent 70 percent of our nation's land – nearly 1.5 billion acres. That working land provides us not only with food and fiber for our own use, but with an array of exportable goods as well. It provides an economic engine and a tax base for rural communities and nearby cities.

But private lands also provide us with many intangible benefits. For example:

- Nearly 90 percent of the rain and snow that recharges our water supply falls on private land.
- About half of the nation's endangered species rely on private land for at least 80 percent of their habitat.
- Private lands are the vital bridges among public refuges, the links that prevent wildlife communities from becoming isolated from each other, threatening biodiversity.
- Many of our open space and scenic vistas are on private lands.
- Private lands are important in sequestering carbon and producing bioenergy products.

In setting the tone for the next Farm Bill, Congress has a new opportunity to elevate the importance of private lands conservation by creating incentives to better manage and protect those lands. We believe that expanded, voluntary, locally led and incentives-based initiatives will be the solution to helping America achieve its environmental goals.

Two years ago, we at NACD established a task force to examine how the Farm Bill conservation programs are working so far and look at what is needed to elevate and expand conservation in this country beyond what we're now doing. This task force included a former chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the president of a major land-grant university and farmers, ranchers, district officials and district employees, representatives from state conservation agencies and from private industry.

Our task force began its work by developing a set of guiding principles, both simple and straightforward, to help crystallize our vision of what is needed to strengthen private lands conservation in America. We believe these principles should be the foundation upon which to refine and expand our federal, state, local and private conservation efforts. These principles are:

- Maintain a voluntary, incentive-driven approach to help private landowners and managers protect their soil, water, wildlife and related resources.
- Increase local leadership and involvement in carrying out programs, setting priorities, developing policies and advocating natural resource conservation and management.
- Utilize science-based technology in making conservation decisions, including those for accountability and baseline establishment.

- Provide land managers with the technical assistance they need to achieve conservation objectives.
- Emphasize the value of cost-effective conservation practices that, for all Americans, enhance quality of life, restore air and watershed health, and contribute to safe and affordable food and fiber.

In formulating our recommendations, the task force reached out to every conservation district in the nation for input on how our conservation programs are working now and what the workload needs are. We asked for suggestions for improving current programs and for new ideas to advance the nation's agenda for conservation. More than 1,700 conservation districts offered suggestions, ranging from modifications to the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to the need for our conservation agenda to reach all communities and watersheds, not just a few targeted areas or producers.

We also contacted a wide cross-section of organizations with an interest in conservation to get their suggestions and comments. Fifty organizations responded, many with key suggestions and ideas on how we can work together to strengthen America's conservation agenda. Several of the organizations we have worked with have testified or will testify before this committee. We were encouraged to find that more than a few entertained thoughts similar to ours and we have incorporated many of their ideas into our recommendations. Our working paper, which is posted on NACD's web site, (www.nacdnet.org) invites input from anyone who is interested.

The people we surveyed as well as those we talked to at conferences and meetings, in private conversations, through postal mail and email all shared a common commitment to the cause of natural resources conservation on private lands. They also shared a common message, and the more we listened, the more similar the message sounded.

The State of the Land

Since the Farm Bill conservation title was enacted in 1985, we've made a lot of progress in reducing soil erosion and increasing productivity. Many of the gains we've made have been the result of conservation compliance, the adoption of conservation tillage, and farmer and rancher participation in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) and EQIP. Since 1996, however, the gains have slowed.

Data from the Conservation Technology Information Center (CTIC) show that in 2000, about 37 percent of the cropland in the U.S. used some form of conservation tillage. Although this is a substantial increase from the early 1980s when it first became popular, the rate of growth in this practice has slowed in recent years. To achieve CTIC's national goal of having 60 percent of all crop acres under some form of conservation tillage by 2005, we must increase its adoption substantially over the next four years.

Reports such as NRCS's *National Resources Inventory*, EPA's latest 305(b) *Report to Congress*, the Fish and Wildlife Service's (FWS) *Status and Trends of Wetlands in the Conterminous United States 1986 to 1997* also tell us that progress has leveled off and that we still have a long way to go in meeting the nation's conservation goals.

A snapshot tells us that:

- According to EPA, more than 300,000 miles of rivers and streams and nearly 8 million acres of lakes are impaired with sediment, nutrients and microorganisms.
- America's private landowners have planted more than one million miles of buffer strips to protect the nation's rivers and streams. Meeting the ambitious goal of two million miles of buffers will hinge upon expanding voluntary conservation incentive programs.
- Wetlands losses have fallen by 80 percent since 1986, due largely to the Farm Bill's wetlands conservation provision and Wetlands Reserve Program. But, sometime this year, the program will reach its acreage limit.
- Runoff from concentrated animal feeding operations is becoming an increasing concern. An estimated 272,000 animal feeding operations need technical assistance to develop sound environmental operating plans over the next 10 years.
- As much as 60 percent of the nation's rangeland and 46 percent of permanent pasture are deteriorating.
- Roughly 2,200 aging flood control dams around the nation need to be rehabilitated or decommissioned at an estimated cost as high as \$540 million.
- Every year since 1992, an average of 2.2 million acres of farmland have been lost to development.
- Although wind and water erosion was reduced by more than 30 percent on private rural lands, we are still losing an estimated 1.9 billion tons of topsoil to erosion on cropland every year.

Using existing programs and their own resources, owners of America's working lands have made significant strides in safeguarding the quality of our water, soil and air. But there's still a long way to go.

The State of Our Programs and Conservation Delivery System

The number of programs addressing private lands conservation has grown considerably over the past 20 years. That may sound like good news, but the fact is, rather than devoting more resources to more programs, we have sliced a shrinking pie into smaller pieces. This proliferation of programs has resulted in efforts that are not well coordinated and sometimes even operating at cross-purposes. Further, each of these programs comes with its own set of priorities, rules and limitations. They are often administered independently – even within one agency.

While the federal funding devoted to private lands conservation has been going down – in real dollars, the amount is about half of what it was in the mid-1930s – state and local

governments have dramatically increased their investments in conservation. Their contributions to private lands conservation have gone from virtually nothing 70 years ago to nearly a billion-and-a-half dollars today, with conservation districts fielding the same level of field staff as NRCS. But, the situation is mixed. In some regions of the country there is a true increase in funding and staffing; in others state and local level funding has leveled off or is in decline.

States have also created additional programs to address nonpoint source pollution, runoff from animal feeding operations, wildlife habitat and other resource issues. In fact, some 38 states have developed cost-share programs with about \$500 million dollars, more than matching the federal effort.

While these state and local initiatives have helped, they have added to the already complex array of programs and are themselves not well coordinated with federal conservation efforts. Many producers today find themselves struggling with multiple sets of rules and requirements, filling out application after application – sometimes for naught.

A major shortcoming of all these programs is their limited reach and lack of adequate funding. Many producers who are targeted by these programs find themselves turned away because of lack of resources for NRCS to provide the assistance they need. This year, for example, of the more than 86,000 producers who applied for assistance through CRP, WRP, EQIP, WHIP and the Farmland Protection Program, nearly 62,000 – 72 percent – were turned away. There is a critical need to reach out to more producers and to get conservation on much more of the landscape.

To sum it all up, the state of our programs today is that they are too complicated, not well coordinated, oversubscribed, under funded and serve only a small percentage of our working lands.

Our delivery system to get these services to producers is the envy of many. It touches producers at the local level, helping them find cost-effective and innovative solutions to resource issues. However, it is straining under the weight of these many programs and the limited funding available to implement them. The fact is that the increase in state and local efforts cannot even come close to making up for the shrinking federal effort – both need to be expanded significantly.

Consider the following workload information.

Two years ago, NACD and several of its partners collected extensive data on the challenges facing private lands conservation through its National Field Workload Analysis (WLA). The purpose of that analysis was to examine the staff years of technical support needed at the field level to carry out 29 core work elements each year. Most of these core work elements encompass Farm Bill program objectives.

The national data collected through the WLA painted a stunning portrait of the private lands workload needs across the countryside. To effectively address the total resource needs on America's private lands would require 359,734 staff years of technical assistance from all sources. If stretched over a 10-year period, this would equate to 35,974 staff years per year, at a cost of nearly \$2.4 billion per year for technical assistance alone. We are just now completing a 2001 WLA and early indications are that the need has not gone down but has increased by 15 percent.

Clearly, increased investments in technical assistance will be necessary to get the conservation job done in this country.

The Path Forward

Based on the work of our task force, the results of the Workload Analysis Survey and other studies, what we heard from our partners and, most importantly, what we heard from producers and district officials, America's conservation districts believe the federal government needs to embrace a new approach to conservation on private working lands. Rather than creating program after program, each designed to focus on one element of the resource base, we need to adopt an approach that concentrates on the entire landscape and the needs of producers. The focal point of this new way of doing business should be the producer's conservation plan, each one tailored to meet the specific needs of each individual operation. The bottom line for our new approach to conservation is: Conservation plans should drive programs, not the reverse.

Producers don't need the added headaches of having to choose from a limited set of program options in a vacuum. A better way would be to help them determine what is needed for their operations and then let local decision-makers recommend what program or programs are best suited to their conservation plan.

We believe this approach would provide much greater flexibility in decision-making at the local level. Such a shift would allow us to focus on getting conservation on the ground, not on "implementing programs." It also would allow us to better coordinate the existing tools in our conservation tool chest.

From virtually everyone we talked to, the message was loud and clear that a new incentives program is also needed to encourage producers to implement conservation practices. Practices that not only benefit their operations, but also produce important public benefits such as better soil, cleaner water, cleaner air and more fish and wildlife habitat. A new incentives program, fully funded and available to all producers, is needed to encourage conservation on more of the landscape. We envision rewarding at various levels producers who apply and maintain conservation practices, depending upon the extent and complexity of the conservation systems they install and/or maintain. The concept is very straightforward: The more conservation a producer puts on the land, the higher the incentive payment the producer receives.

We also envision a different option for implementing this new approach. Rather than implementing this concept exclusively through the traditional federal approach, we think states that have the capacity and the interest should be given a greater role and have the option of implementing it themselves, in cooperation with NRCS. As I mentioned earlier, state and local governments have strengthened their capacity significantly in the past several decades and many now have the capacity to be the driving force behind the implementation of this new federal-state-local-private paradigm.

We believe the benefits of a new incentives program and a greater state and local role in its implementation would be tremendous. It would be cost-effective and provide needed coordination among current and future conservation initiatives. It also would leverage even more state, local and private sector investment in private lands conservation.

This new paradigm also would bring more control back to the local level where decisions could be made by those who know what is needed and what works best. However, we recognize that there still would be a need for federal oversight and review.

By calling for this new agenda, we're not suggesting that we throw out existing programs; we need those to complement what we're proposing. In fact, we strongly support better funding and broader application of the existing USDA conservation programs to help producers get the conservation on the land they need to qualify for the new incentives and to meet the requirements of new and growing environmental regulations.

In shifting the focus of our delivery system, we also ardently support enhancing and elevating the priority of USDA's natural resources and environment mission. We believe that the Natural Resources Conservation Service must be maintained as a stand-alone agency and should have the responsibility for carrying out all of USDA's non-forestry environment and natural resources programs, including both technical and financial assistance components.

NRCS should also continue its role in providing technical and financial assistance for the current Farm Bill and other USDA conservation programs. The agency's role in providing leadership and guidance for national programs, as well as maintaining a national system of technical standards and guidelines, should be strengthened.

Private working lands forestry programs also should be strengthened and continue to be carried out through the Forest Service's State and Private Forestry programs. Targeted toward 44 percent of America's forestlands, these important programs are implemented in cooperation with state forestry agencies and usually involve conservation districts. They provide technical and other help the nation's nearly 10 million nonindustrial private forestland owners need to plan and apply complex conservation treatments.

And where do the traditional commodity programs fit in this mix? We are by no means suggesting that our new approach supplant all traditional farm support programs. Although changes may be needed in that arena, too, producers need these programs to

compete in world markets. We believe that incentives for producers to provide conservation and environmental benefits from private working lands would complement those programs and could become an important component in future farm policy. In the context of today's chaotic agricultural economy and globalization of trade, it makes sense for conservation to be part of agriculture's economic, as well as environmental agenda.

Projected Benefits

By reaching far more producers, by providing for more local control and by delivering conservation assistance effectively and efficiently, we believe our new model would provide much greater benefits across the landscape than current, top-down and highly targeted programs.

The investment required for this vision will be significant – we estimated a fully functioning incentives program alone could cost up to \$8 billion annually. But we need to keep in mind that preventing resource problems now is far less costly than solving them later. We also need to keep in mind the return we'll get on that investment:

- better soil;
- cleaner water;
- greater profits; and
- a brighter future.

Even beyond these, we believe that better managing and enhancing our private working lands will result in more abundant wildlife, higher quality woodlands and wetlands, clearer air, safe and affordable food and fiber and an enhanced quality of life for all Americans.

II. Recommended Changes to Existing USDA Conservation Programs

1. Environmental Quality Incentives Program

EQIP authorizing legislation establishes a single, voluntary program to provide flexible technical, financial and educational assistance to farmers and ranchers to address threats to soil, water and related natural resources on agricultural lands, including grazing lands and forestland. Although authorized for funding at \$200 million annually, Congress limited funding at \$174 million in fiscal years 1998 through 2000.

Requests from producers for assistance through EQIP have been overwhelming – far exceeding the amount of funds available and further stressing the already overburdened NRCS-conservation district delivery system. With additional funding, EQIP has the potential to garner tremendous environmental benefits. It also provides an opportunity to reach out to socially disadvantaged producers who traditionally have not participated in USDA's conservation programs. To further enhance the program's outreach, water quality – including irrigation water management – soil conservation and wildlife habitat benefits, conservation districts recommend extending EQIP's authorization and increasing funding to \$1 billion annually. Twenty percent of this amount should be designated to fund technical assistance support of this program.

Over its five-year operating period, several adjustments have been made to respond to producer concerns about how the program is being implemented. In 1999, responding to a survey from NACD, more than 1,500 conservation districts identified additional revisions, both administrative and statutory, needed to make EQIP function more effectively and efficiently.

Legislative Changes Needed to EQIP

- Increase funding authorization to \$1 billion annually.
- Remove prohibition on expenditures being made in the same fiscal year as a contract's execution.
- Provide for an annual practices component and contracts of less than five years in duration.
- Remove the 10-year limitation on EQIP contracts.

Administrative Changes Needed to EQIP

- Provide that a minimum of 35 percent and a maximum of 55 percent of EQIP funds, as determined by the local work group, be made available to producers outside of priority areas.
- Give local work groups more decision-making authority.
- Remove requirement for developing a comprehensive resource management plan prior to submitting an EQIP application.
- Allow the planning process to be limited to problem areas rather than an entire operation.
- Streamline the administration of EQIP by dropping the requirement for concurrence by the Farm Service Agency.

2. Conservation Reserve Program

The CRP provides cost-share assistance and rental payments to farmers to retire highly erodible and environmentally sensitive cropland for 10- to 15-year contract periods. In addition to dramatically reducing soil erosion on cropland by nearly 695 million tons per year, it provides myriad other benefits including stemming agricultural runoff and providing critically needed wildlife habitat. To maximize CRP's environmental benefits, conservation districts recommend, along with some program improvements, extending its authorization and increasing the acreage cap to 45 million acres.

Conservation districts support the following policy changes on CRP:

- CRP should continue to use the enrollment process whereby land is bid into the program with a productivity-adjusted rental rate thus reflecting the true cost of the land.
- CRP should be balanced so that benefits, whether economic or environmental, occur over the full landscape of American farmland
- CRP should be used to help prevent urban sprawl by extending contracts to 30 years or perpetual easements.
- CRP enrollment should continue targeting through the Environmental Benefits Index (EBI) with those lands achieving a high benefit also achieving the highest rental payment.
- The EBI should be a product of the State Technical Committee and not designed as a "one size fits all" program criteria at the national level. States should retain the flexibility that will allow them to choose the criteria that give them a high EBI. For instance, if soil productivity and soil erosion are major concerns, the EBI should be structured to account for a mix of on-site as well as off-site soil erosion benefits.
- The CRP should be geared toward retaining long term retention of benefits once investments by the producer and the public are made. These enrolled lands should be retained in the pool of eligible lands and producers should be

offered other incentives such as easements to retain them in the program. Easements should be paid for on the value of the land based on free market factors and not on the EBI or soil productivity index.

- The CRP should continue as a targeted approach as provided for in CREP if the state so chooses and provides a matching component to the targeting of federal funds. The original intent of setting aside 40 – 45 million acres of highly erodible farmland in a CRP should be retained.
- The goal of having 12.5 percent of the CRP acreage planted in trees should be increased with added incentives for the producer. Targeting those acres should be done at the local and state levels. Contract extensions of 10 years should automatically be offered to those who elect to plant trees rather than grass cover so producers can gain the economic benefit of planting trees at the end of 20 years.
- Haying, grazing and timber harvest on CRP lands should be prohibited unless those activities conform to a district-approved plan that will maintain buffers, benefit wildlife, improve cover quality and reduce erosion. Conservation districts urge Congress to accept recommended language proposed by USDA to amend CRP to allow high intensity, short-term livestock grazing as an authorized maintenance and management practice on CRP contract lands with the authority given to state FSA Committees and NRCS State Conservationists to set the timing and criteria of this practice.
- The contract provisions for CRP should not provide for an early out during the contract period since it was a mutually acceptable contract period at the time of signing. Early out provisions would further disrupt national plans to remove highly erodible, fragile or otherwise environmentally sensitive lands from production.
- Conservation districts are opposed to any land-use practice that will change the contract between the producer and the federal government or the agreed rental rate as originally established at the beginning of the contract.

3. Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program

WHIP is designed to help landowners improve wildlife habitat on private lands. The program was authorized to use \$50 million in CRP funds to help producers enhance wildlife habitat. WHIP provides cost sharing to landowners for developing habitat for upland wildlife, wetland wildlife, endangered species, fisheries and other wildlife. It also provides for consulting with state technical committees to set priorities for cost-share measures and habitat development projects. WHIP has also proven to be extremely popular and exhausted its funding authorization in two years. Conservation districts recommend extending its authorization and funding the program at \$50 million annually.

4. Wetlands Reserve Program

The WRP provides assistance to farmers to restore cropped wetlands through easements and cost-share payments. In addition to its environmental and wildlife habitat benefits, this voluntary wetland protection program has been extremely popular among farmers and ranchers. Originally capped at 975,000 acres and nearing that cap, the fiscal year 2001 agriculture appropriations bill authorized enrolling an additional 100,000 acres in the program. Conservation districts recommend extending WRP's authorization and allowing enrollment of an additional 250,000 acres annually.

5. Farmland Protection Program

FPP is a voluntary program that authorizes USDA to join with state or local governments to purchase conservation easements on important farmland threatened by conversion to other uses. It is increasingly clear that preserving farmland preserves quality of life for all citizens, including urban and urbanizing areas. It also helps guide and direct urban sprawl, thereby having inherent and popular value for everyone. Conservation districts recommend extending the Farmland Protection Program's authorization and increasing its funding to \$65 million annually.

6. Conservation of Private Grazing Lands Program

Congress enacted the Conservation of Private Grazing Lands Program (CPGL) provision to provide technical, educational, and related assistance to landowners and operators on the nation's 642 million acres of private grazing lands. Funding was authorized at \$20 million in 1996, increasing to \$60 million by the third year. To help reverse the deteriorating trends on roughly 60 percent of US rangeland and about 46 percent of permanent pasture, conservation districts recommend maintaining the funding authorization for CPGL at \$60 million annually.

7. Forest Stewardship Program

The Forest Stewardship Program (FSP) helps nearly 10 million nonindustrial private forestland (NIPF) owners – who own 44 percent of the nation's forestland – better manage and use their forest resources. Under FSP, every state has developed and is implementing a comprehensive management program to ensure that private forestlands are managed under stewardship plans. The program is cost-shared with states and provides high quality technical and stewardship planning assistance. Conservation districts recommend extending FSP and increasing its funding authorization to \$50 million annually.

8. Forestry Incentives Program (FIP) and Stewardship Incentives Program (SIP)

The U.S. public derives tremendous benefits from non-industrial private forest. There is an urgent need to assure that these benefits continue to be realized. Of the 737 million

acres of forest in the United States, close to half (about 350 million acres) are considered non-industrial private forest (NIPF). NIPF lands include all private forest ownerships above one acre that do not contain a wood processing facility. The majority of NIPF lands are owned by people who may have strong interest in seeing their forest managed sustainably, but simply do not have adequate knowledge or resources to do this. Given that the management of these forests has a tremendous influence on the quality of our nation's water, watersheds, air, wildlife habitat and timber resources, the owners of these lands must be provided the resources they need to assure proper management.

A recent survey of landowners with Forest Stewardship Plans – long term multi-resource management plans prepared under the Forest Stewardship Program – indicates that landowners with such plans are almost three times more likely to implement their plans if they receive financial and/or technical assistance than if they don't.

Federal funding to landowners for the implementation of sustainable forestry practices is currently insufficient. The two existing programs designed to provide financial incentives to NIPF landowners are either not funded (Stewardship Incentives Program) or under-funded (Forestry Incentives Program). Experience has taught us that neither of these programs provides sufficient flexibility for the states to 1) target their highest priority needs or 2) tailor program management to their state administrative structures.

A new financial assistance program is urgently needed and should replace the Stewardship Incentive Program (SIP) and the Forestry Incentives Program (FIP). There is strong support for a new landowner incentives program from many groups that work with NIPF landowners, NACD the National Association of State Foresters and the National Council on Private Forestry.

The primary differences between this new incentives program and the former programs (SIP and FIP) are that states would have greater flexibility in determining how the funds would be used to meet national and local objectives and the percentage of funds spent for education, financial and technical assistance would depend upon the needs within each state, as determined by the Forest Service and NRCS in partnership with the state forestry agency and state stewardship committees. The new program should allow states to set their own acreage limitations.

9. Forest Legacy Program

The Forestry Legacy Program (FLP) is intended to conserve environmentally important forests under threat of conversion to nonforest uses. From 1978 to 1994, private forestland tracts of 10 acres or less increased from 11 million to 16.6 million acres. A well-funded Forest Legacy Program, through which landowners sell development rights and the right of public access while retaining other rights in private ownership, can, in part, help prevent the fragmentation of the nation's forestlands. It operates on a willing seller-willing buyer concept. Conservation districts recommend extending the Forest Legacy Program and increasing its funding authorization to \$50 million annually.

10. Urban and Community Forestry Program

The Urban and Community Forestry Program (UCFP) provides the leadership, in cooperation with states, for improving and expanding urban forest ecosystems in the nation's 45,000 towns and cities where 80 percent of our population resides. The program provides leadership for state of the art technology and grants to urban areas to improve their quality of life through tree planting, maintenance and urban tree protection actions. Conservation districts recommend extending authorization for the Urban and Community Forestry Program and increasing its funding authorization to \$50 million annually.

11. Resource Conservation and Development Program

The Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) Program, a unique program within USDA that empowers rural people and their urban neighbors to help themselves, was extended through 2002 by the 1996 Farm Bill. The program assists local people by providing tools and technical support to stabilize and grow their own communities while protecting and developing natural resources.. Conservation districts recommend providing the RC&D Program with a permanent authorization and increasing the number of authorized RC&D areas to 450.

12. Compliance and Other Provisions

In addition to the above financial assistance programs of the Farm Bill, the Highly Erodible Land and Wetlands Conservation provisions (conservation compliance, sodbuster and swampbuster) of the Farm Bill have been instrumental in reducing erosion on cropland, pasture and rangeland, and in significantly slowing the conversion of wetlands to agricultural uses. Although enforcement of the compliance provisions has been lax in some areas fine-tuning of these provisions is needed and conservation districts recommend retaining them. We also recommend that the compliance provisions for both erosion on cropland and for swampbuster be extended to all USDA farm program benefits received, including crop insurance.

13. General Provisions

In addition to the above, conservation districts endorses coordinated resource management planning (CRMP) and the "En Libra" concept, both of which are used to address and mediate complex natural resource issues at the local level on both public and private lands. These processes also support local, producer-developed conservation plans, implemented with technical assistance provided through conservation districts to coordinate the conservation activities on a given operating unit and with protections for confidentiality.

Since the Farm Bill conservation programs are targeted primarily toward lands with a cropping history, the conservation districts support establishing a grassland conservation easements program to protect noncropped native lands. Since such a program would

likely operate similar to the current CRP, it would be appropriate to include in the Farm Bill and implement through conservation districts and NRCS.

Conservation districts support strengthening conservation research and development and extension activities through the Farm Bill, as well as establishing goals for the nation's soil quality. Such initiatives should include the potential role of agriculture in bio-fuels, carbon sequestration and mitigating global climate change. It also encourages and supports the development of new technologies such as precision agriculture and biotechnology that can enhance both productivity and environmental quality.

All of the Farm Bill conservation programs should include "safe harbor provisions" to help producers deal with endangered species and invasive species situations. All programs also should provide tools and funding to help small and limited resource producers address natural resource issues.

Technical Assistance

In carrying out their mission to coordinate and carry out all levels of conservation programs, conservation districts work closely with NRCS to provide landowners the technical (CTA) program to provide the technical and other help farmers and ranchers need to plan and apply complex conservation treatments in implementing these Farm Bill programs. It is important to keep in mind that CTA is also a program. It was intended as a program in and of itself the purpose of which was to help the nation's farmers and ranchers and other landowners address their resource conservation needs by providing technical support at the local level, including non-HEL lands that are nonetheless eroding at unacceptable levels. It is critical that Congress establish stable sources of funding for the Farm Bill programs and technical assistance needed to implement them without detracting from NRCS's basic technical assistance mission.

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, thank for the opportunity present our views.

Attachments

Biographical Sketch of Read Smith
NACD Federal Grant Portfolio